

The
Head of the River
Church



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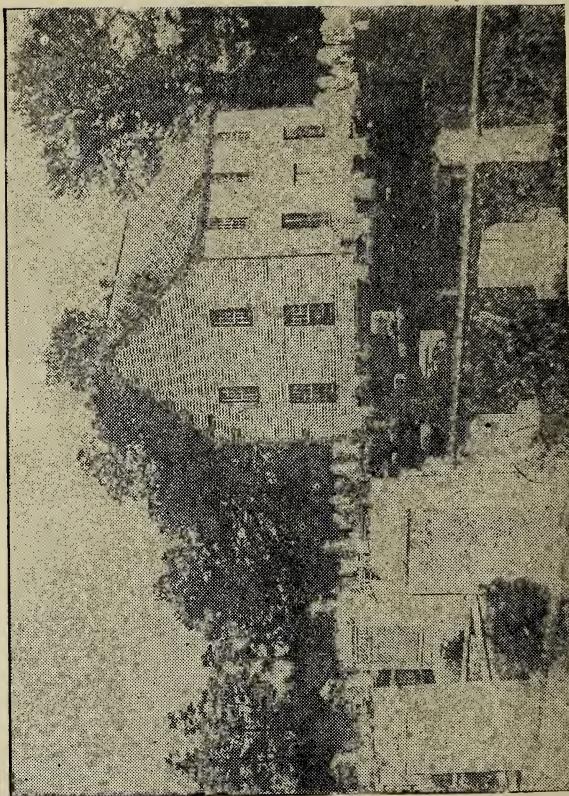
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THE HEAD OF THE RIVER CHURCH



The HEAD of the RIVER CHURCH

AN HISTORICAL SKETCH

BY

JOHN R. REEVES



1916

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PREFACE

As far as possible original sources have been consulted. However, in a history of this kind where tradition plays such an important part, errors are apt to occur and must be excused. Lastly the Author wishes to gratefully acknowledge his indebtedness to H. Stanley Craig and Benjamin Weatherby, for the valuable information they secured, and by the documents they so kindly loaned.

JOHN R. REEVES.

Tuckahoe, New Jersey,
Sept. 30, 1916.

The HEAD of the RIVER CHURCH

AN HISTORICAL SKETCH

JF YOU had the opportunity of visiting Europe in those days when the sightseers were well received, you may have noticed in practically every community into which you entered, that among the relics of antiquity, of which the European is so justly proud, the Church Building occupied a very prominent place.

Now for a young nation I do not think that America can be accused of lacking in appreciation of these landmarks which are associated with the history of the Republic, but I notice that although a Meeting House has here and there arisen to fame among relics, that in the majority of cases they do not have the importance that is attached to other objects.

Perhaps this condition exists because in Europe the union of Church and State has forced the world to realize the place these monuments of worship held in the development of civilization in the community, whereas in America the many cults developing out of that fundamental principle of the land, freedom of worship has so divided the interests of the public that they have lost sight of individual Churches in spiritual growth of any particular settlement. On the other hand we find that the Old World and the new have developed in vastly different ways, for in Europe the cities and towns were well established before the advent of such modern inventions as railroads, hence if the railroad wished patronage it was forced to fit itself to the situation of the towns. But in this country, especially in a region of smaller communities, the railroads drew a straight line and the town, if it wished to have the facilities offered,

had to move anywhere from one to ten miles. State roads developed similar attractions, so here and there throughout the country surrounded perhaps by a few tumbledown log or slab dwellings we find one of these old Churches compassed about by its tiny graveyard, peopled only with the memories of that day when it was the heart of a little settlement of God-fearing men and women.

Such a place is the Head of the River Church, situated on the line between Cape May and Atlantic Counties, about four miles above the modern town of Tuckahoe on the headwaters of that beautiful little stream, the Tuckahoe River which empties into the Great Egg Harbor Bay. The same building stands that was finally completed in 1813, although the organization had been founded as early as 1780, while the building itself though uncompleted was dedicated in 1792. To be sure repairs have been made from time to time, but only as they were needed, and in such a way as to harmonize with the colonial surroundings.

There is no distinctive Church form to the little wooden building seated amidst the grave stones, surrounded by the scrub oaks and pines with which this region abounds, for its outward appearance differs little from the old-fashioned farm house. But when one steps across the threshold it is like retreating into a former century. Around three sides run the galleries leaving an opening in the center so small as to persuade one to believe that persons in the two side galleries might shake hands if they stretched a little. Directly in front is the pulpit, so high that the preacher stands mid-way between the main floor and the galleries, favoring the latter if anything. And this pulpit will well bear the second glance for it is wide, massive and has two pedestals, one on either side holding the lamps, such a speaker's stand as you see represented in the old drawings of parliament halls. Stoves of a very ancient design heat the room while their flues seem to encircle the edifice before they find the way of escape. Lastly, and in this particular I am afraid the Church goer of to-day would find cause for complaint, the seats are nothing but old board benches, those on the main floor having a kind of slat back but those in the gallery not even fitted with this luxury. Add a coat of grey

paint to the seats and walls, picture the pulpit in white with a red plush top, and think of the windows with small panes and all the posts and mouldings and frames trimmed with white and you have completed the representation of the interior of this historic Methodist Church.

By a comparative reading of Lee's New Jersey as a Colony and as a State, the Journal of Aaron Leaming and Gov. Burnet's letters in Colonial Documents, we learn that as early as 1638 Cape May County began to be settled and that by 1726 there were nearly 1000 inhabitants to be accounted for. We also learn that these pioneers were for the most part colonists from the other states in the vicinity and largely of English extraction and that the vast majority of them were Protestants; this latter fact is known by a number of references in old papers and because in the whole county there is to be found but one small Catholic Church outside of the Seside Resorts, which are of very recent growth.

The Established Church of England was never very energetic in its Colonial work, while the Puritan seems to have confined his activity largely to New England. Such being the case the whole of New Jersey was an open field for the then young Denominations of the Baptists and the Methodists. In this section which we have designated as Head of the River, the Baptist workers seem to have been the first to arrive, although at just what date is unknown, and there they built a small Church. But for some reason they did not flourish, and no one knows to-day just when they discontinued their activities, even the spot where their building stood being now designated by tradition alone.

In the year of Our Lord 1780, during a blinding snowstorm, the first Methodist itinerant, a Mr. James, made his appearance and sought shelter at the home of David Sayres, a captain in the Continental army and a bitter opponent of traveling preachers. But Mr. Jones, although an Englishman and favoring the Crown, so won his way into the heart of this sturdy American soldier that Sayres became the first convert to the Methodist Church in this County. The old house is no longer standing but was located on that plot of ground about one and one-

quarter miles north of the Church on Cape May Avenue now called the Sayres' Field.

A society was formed by the organization of a Class to meet regularly at Hunter's Mill. This visit of Mr. James seems to have been the only one to the County, but in the next year we find Caleb Pedichord and Joseph Cromwell appointed to the West Jersey Circuit, which then comprised all of Cape May, Cumberland and Salem Counties. But the country was plunged in the Revolutionary war, the people were in a ferment, and as most of the Methodist preachers were sent out from England, and as these men, although supposed to be non-partisan were often indiscreet, we find them subjected to frequent annoyances necessitating many changes, so beginning with November of this year, 1781, we have a list of preachers who presided over this Circuit, none of whom remained over a year.

- 1781—James O. Cromwell and Joseph Everett.
- 1782—Joshua Dudley and Richard Ivy.
- 1783—Woolman Hickson and John Magary.
- 1784—Samuel Rowe, William Partridge and John Fidler.
- 1785—Thomas Ware, Robert Sparks and William Phoebus.
- 1786—Jacob Brush, John Simmons and Jacob Lurton.
- 1787—Robert Cann, John McClaskey and John Milburn.

During this period, the Society at the Head of the River began to grow and arrangements were made for regular services to be held in the mill owned by Jeremiah and William Smith, with preaching by the itinerants at stated intervals. In 1788 Salem Circuit was formed including practically the same territory as the old West Jersey Circuit, with perhaps the difference that it did not extend quite as far to the northward. Without doubt the greatest man to labor in this circuit was Benjamin Abbot, who began his work in the region in 1792. Under his suggestion, aided by the Smith brothers, who quickly became enthusiastic over the project, and by Daniel Benezet, a large estate holder, who

donated land and material, the Society began the erection of the Church building that stands to-day. Owing, however, to lack of funds and the fact that Abbott was moved from the Circuit in a critical time the building operations lagged, and not until 1813 were they finally completed by the addition of floors and galleries. It was in this period between 1794 and 1800 that Francis Asbury, according to several traditions, preached several times at this Church.

The men who served the Salem Circuit were:

- 1788—Joseph Cromwell, Nathaniel B. Mills and John Cooper.
1789—Simon Pyle, Jethro Johnson and Sylvester Hutchinson.
1790—Joseph Cromwell and William Dougherty.
1791—James Bell and John Clark.
1792—Benjamin Abbot and David Bartine.
1793—Wilson Lee and Hugh Work.
1794—Richard Swain and Anthony Turck.
1795—Moses Crane and Jacob Egbert.
1795—Robert McCoy and Peter Vannest.
1797—William McLenahan and Benjamin Fisler.
1798—Jacob Egbert and Jesse Justice.
1799—Richard Swain and Wesley Budd.
1800—Richard Swain and Richard Lyon.
1801—Thomas Everard and Asa Swain.

Salem Circuit was split in 1802 into Salem and Cape May Circuits, but was united again in 1805. In 1807 Cumberland Circuit was formed including Cape May County and all the eastern and southern portion of Cumberland County. The preachers serving up to the year 1839 were as follows:

- 1802—Jesse Justice and David Dunham.
1803—Richard Swain and Asa Smith,
1804—John Walker and John Durbin.

- 1805—John Walker and Nathan Swain.
1806—William Mills and Caleb Kendall.
1807—David Bartine and Joseph Stephens.
1808—William Smith and Charles Reed.
1809—Daniel Ireland and John Fox.
1810—Samuel Budd and Daniel Ireland.
1811—Thomas Dunn and Joseph Bennett.
1812—William Smith and Joseph Bennett.
1813—Nathan Swain and Daniel Fidler.
1814—Daniel Fidler and Daniel Ireland,
1815—Solomon Sharp and Nathan Swain.
1816—Solomon Sharp and Thomas Davis.
1817—Thomas Neal and Thomas Davis.
1818—Thomas Neal and John Creamer.
1819—Edward Stout and John Creamer.
1820—Edward Stout and Daniel Fidler.
1821—John Finley and John Collins.
1822—John Finley and John McLaurin
1823-24—Edward Page and Eliphilet Reed.
1825-26—William Williams and William Lummis.
1827—John Woolson, Robert Gerry and Sedgewick Rusling.
1828—John Woolson, Sedgewick Rusling and Joseph Ashbrook.
1829-30—Watters Burrows and John Ayars.
1831—William Folk and William Stevens.
1832—William Folk and Nathaniel Chew.
1833—John Henry and Joseph Ashbrook.
1834—Edward Stout and George Raybold.
1835—Nathaniel Chew and George Raybold.
1836—William Williams and J. W. McDougall.
1837-38—J. J. Sleeper and Thomas G. Stewart.

At the time of the completion of the Church in 1813, there arose a little difficulty over the property, owing to the fact that the wife of Rev. Joseph Pillmore, of Pillmore and Boardman fame, was not of age when

she signed the deed. This difficulty was finally straightened out by Joseph Jones, commonly called "Coffee Jones," who had married an older daughter of Benezet and who with his wife were executors of the estate, Benezet having died a year or two previously.

From this time until 1835 we find the Head of the River Church mentioned in several journals of the vicinity as a place of great piety and evangelical zeal. Thomas Neal, the Presiding Elder of the District at this later date, mentions the Church in connection with a remarkable experience in his life. He was conducting revival meetings here during a severe drought. Between services he went into the woods and prayed earnestly for rain, returning to the meeting and telling the company assembled that he believed they should prepare for it. Before the service was over the clouds began to gather, and soon a heavy shower had moistened the parched earth. All considered this to be a manifestation, answering the prayer of Thomas Neal.

In 1839 Cape May Circuit was divided. Head of the River, Marshallville, Tuckahoe, Hawkinsville, Petersburg, Beesleys Point and, later, Seaville became known as the Atlantic Circuit. Joseph Atwood was the first pastor of this Charge. Head of the River was the principal point in this Circuit and continued to have morning preaching. It is interesting to note that the Quarterly Conference of this new Circuit fixed the pastor's salary at \$256 and allowed him \$30 extra for wood and table. Nor was a parsonage included in this magnificent remuneration.

The next name of particular interest was William A. Brooks, who was the preacher in charge in 1842. He was a man of God, having great power in the pulpit, and under his ministry was held the greatest revival the Head of the River Church has ever known, 130 professing conversion and uniting with the Society. Preachers in charge of this Circuit were:

1839—Joseph Atwood.

1840-41—David Duffel.

It was in the year 1841 that the Quarterly Conference decided to

buy or build a parsonage at or near Williamsburg, the money to be raised by popular subscription.

1842—William A. Brooks.

1843-45—Abraham Gearhardt.

1846-47—James White.

1848-49—Thomas Christopher.

In the second year of Christopher's pastorate John W. Seran was appointed as assistant. During the year the parsonage was sold for \$300.

1850-51—W. C. Nelson.

1852-53—William V. Darrow,

1854—James W. Primrose.

Mr. Primrose was returned to the Circuit in 1855 but died in March of that year; he was succeeded by Hamilton S. Norris.

1856—Hamilton S. Norris.

1857—J. F. Morrell.

1858—C. W. Heisley.

Matthias H. Shimp was appointed at this time to assist on the Circuit.

1859—Samuel Ashmead.

1860-61—Levi J. Rhodes.

1862-63—H. B. Beegle with Joseph Lanning Roe as his assistant.

Because of the fact that other points on the Charge were fast outgrowing the Head of the River, owing to the condition of the routes of travel and because the blast furnace which had been the chief source of this settlement's wealth, had closed, Mr. Beegle in 1863 attempted to make the Head of the River an afternoon preaching place instead of a morning one. There was trouble at once, and the Church split off from the Atlantic Circuit, hiring Jacob Price as the minister. Under his pas-

torate, which lasted until 1866, we find the organization in the best condition that it had attained since the pastorate of William Brooks in 1842. Many communicants were added to the Society and the building was thoroughly renovated. After Price was called elsewhere, the Church returned to the Atlantic Circuit under the ministry of E. H. Durell, who was pastor in charge in 1866, services now being held in the afternoon.

The next year another radical change was made by the division of the Atlantic Circuit into Petersburg Circuit, containing Petersburg, Seaville and Beesleys Point, with Israel Woolson as pastor; and Tuckahoe Circuit, comprising Tuckahoe, Hawkinsville, Marshallville Chapel and Head of the River, E. H. Durrell continuing as preacher in charge until he was succeeded in 1869 by Calvin C. Eastlack.

In the year 1884, largely through the efforts of Captain T. Weeks, the plot adjoining the Church was purchased from the Estels and made into a continuation of the old burying ground that had become too small. In the same year an Anniversary Sunday was instituted. All-Day services to be held ~~the second Sunday in October~~ in commemoration of the founding of the organization. This service has been continued from that time until the present.

David Stewart, who came to the Tuckahoe Charge in 1886, discontinued the preaching service, although Sunday-School and Class Meetings were still held. S. H. Hann, who came to the Circuit in 1893, reorganized the preaching services, which continued through the pastorates of Charles F. Downs and Zachary T. Dugan, but were discontinued in 1902 under Samuel C. Chattin. In 1903, Marshallville Chapel and the Hawkinsville Church having become very small and the Tuckahoe Church having correspondingly increased, Tuckahoe came to be considered a single charge with the other points in the Circuit as little more than missions under the supervision of Tuckahoe. Under J. S. Garrison, who came to the Charge in 1906, Dr. Walter L. Yerkes, a God-fearing dentist practicing his profession in Middletown, was appointed to supply the pulpit at the Head of the River as a Local Preacher. This he did very ably, conducting preaching service every Sunday evening

until 1913, when he was appointed by the New Jersey Annual Conference to supply the Church at South Seaville. Dr. Yerkes, however, did not desert the Church at the Head of the River, but continued to hold a preaching service there during the week, usually on Thursday night.

During the last ten years the Head of the River Church has been under the direct supervision of the Tuckahoe Pastor, but its continuence as a regular preaching point, plus the fact that it has grown in grace and added many to the Kingdom of God by conversion, has been due largely to the untiring efforts of Dr. Walter L. Yerkes.

Following is a list of preachers of the Tuckahoe Charge from 1869 until the present.

- 1869-71—Calvin C. Eastlack.
- 1872-74—William Margerum.
- 1875-77—James F. Morrell.
- 1878-80—William F. Zane.
- 1881-82—Charles W. Heisley.
- 1883-85—Mordecai C. Stokes.
- 1886-88—David Stewart.
- 1889-92—Henry G. Williams.
- 1893-96—Samuel H. Hann.
- 1897-98—Charles F. Downs.
- 1899-01—Zachary T. Dugan.
- 1902—Samuel C. Chatin.
- 1903-05—Henry M. Blake.
- 1906-08—J. Swain Garrison.
- 1909-10—Joseph E. Sawn.
- 1911-13—Henry B. White.
- 1914-15—Harry P. Grim.
- 1916—John R. Reeves.

The Anniversary Services held this year, 1916, represented the 124th since the founding of the Church. Dr. James W. Marshall,

District Superintendent of the New Brunswick District of the New Jersey Conference, preached a beautiful sermon in the morning. At 2 o'clock P. M. Bro. Walter L. Yerkes led a Song and Consecration Service, a number of old preachers being present and taking part. At 2.45 o'clock P. M. the afternoon address was delivered by Rev. John R. Reeves, Pastor of the Church at Tuckahoe. Dr. Walter L. Yerkes preached the evening sermon at 7.45 o'clock P. M. No better attended or more enjoyable anniversary service, taken as a whole, has ever been held.

ADDENDA.

Since this little history went to print if has been definitely ascertained that Francis Asbury did meet with the Society at the Head of the River on at least two separate occasions.

Journal of Francis Asbury, under the heading of New Jersey, dated April 18th, 1809:

The entry here says that he preached on Sunday, April 16, 1809, at Cohansie (now Bridgeton) and on Monday, April 17, at Port Elizabeth. Then comes the following: "At Tuckahoe Chapel (Head of the River) my subject was Ephesians 3:8. I sat down and taught with pleasure. I dined with N. Swain. Richard has gone to his rest and reward. The people told me that my time of absence on this path was twenty-five years."

Asbury's last visit is definitely established by this record as April 17, 1809. From this reference to his absence from the Society for twenty-five years, we know that he must have visited the Head of the River some time in the year 1784, or six years before the present edifice was built. How many times he may have journeyed over this district previously, we dare not conjecture.

